

Restoration work begins on First Parish Church's historic organ

By Jon Lehman
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Last week, four men parked a big yellow truck in front of Duxbury's First Parish Church, went inside and began taking apart the church's 163-year-old pipe organ.

They were craftsmen from Andover Organ Company, engaged in the first phase of a nine-month, \$465,000 project to repair, restore and expand the historic organ. Over the course of three days, the crew dismantled, piece by piece, the more than 1,000 pipes – ranging from large, heavy wooden boxes that make the organ's lowest notes to tiny “flutes” less than a quarter-inch in diameter – as well as keyboards, pedalboard, hundreds of levers and pivots, pipes, ducts and the massive wind chest.

The parts, each carefully labeled, were packed in boxes and trucked to the company's workshop in Methuen, where each piece will be inspected and repaired or replaced if needed. The 19th-century cabinetwork will be restored and refinished and the entire organ will be reassembled and tested in the workshop before being disassembled again and trucked back to the church.

According to First Parish Church organist and music director Edwin Swanborn, the project will not only repair and preserve an outstanding example of the classic “Boston school” of mechanical pipe organs from the mid-19th century, but when the organ is reinstalled in the church next fall, it will be better than ever, with added pipes to produce a richer, fuller sound more fitted to the church's spacious sanctuary. Also, the keyboard action will be more responsive, Swanborn said, making it easier to accomplish delicate musical shadings and to play a wider range of music.

“It is our good fortune,” said Swanborn, “that Andover Organ Company, which has long maintained our organ, is a leading specialist in the historical restoration and rebuilding of tracker-action organs. They have spare parts salvaged from other similar organs over the years, which are exactly the parts we needed to enlarge and complete our instrument – to make it what it would have been originally, had the church at the time been able to afford it.”



Crew from Andover Organ Company remove one of the large, bass pipes from the First Parish Church organ.

Photos by Jon Lehman



Mike Eaton, left, and Andy Hagberg watch as Don Glover labels and packs one of the more than 1,000 pipes of First Parish Church's 163-year-old pipe organ. All three are employees of Andover Organ Company.

When the church's present building was erected in 1840, it did not have an organ. Instead, according to a history of the church, the choirmaster accompanied the hymns on his violin. However, some church members – many of them women – wanted the richer sound of an organ. In 1851, the women held the church's first summer fair. In 1852 they had another fair, and in 1853 the church hired the well-known Boston organ-builder William B.D. Simmons, paying him partly with proceeds from the fairs. (The annual summer fair has continued to the present, making it one of the longest-running church fairs in the country.)

Swanborn, who has been planning the restoration project for the past 10 years, is relieved that work is finally under way. He expressed gratitude to the church members and townspeople who contributed much of the funds needed for the project, both during a fundraising campaign two years ago and in special collections at the popular Christmas Eve musical services. He noted that the project could not have happened without the extremely generous support of one committed donor, who single-handedly contributed almost half of the funds needed, and he praised the church's governing board, which committed substantial church funds to complete the fund-raising effort in time for the contract to be signed.

Swanborn, himself an expert in Baroque-era music who has made many recordings playing both organ and harpsichord, said he believes the restoration "will put our organ in good health for its next hundred years and allow it to more fully and adequately serve the congregation and the community."

He looks forward to showing it off next Christmas Eve and again at a gala rededication concert to be held in early 2018.



Large organ pipes are laid across pews in the sanctuary, ready to be packed and trucked to the workshop..

Photo by Edwin Swanborn



Andy Hagberg, center, and Don Glover of Andover Organ Company box organ parts for transport as organist Edwin Swanborn, left, watches.